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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 003116

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM EAID PREL ASEC PTER RP

SUBJECT: ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN MUSLIM AUTONOMOUS REGION IN SOUTH NOW UNDER WAY

REF: A. MANILA 3046

1B. MANILA 2442

1C. MANILA 2332

1D. MANILA 1529

Classified By: Political Officer Timothy Cipullo for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The campaign for the August 8 elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) began on June 128. Despite earlier promises, Malacanang has endorsed a candidate for governor: Zaldy Ampatuan, a mayor and scion of a well-known political clan. Ampatuan is now favored to win in what many predict could be a violent race filled with fraud. Two Muslim insurgent groups have criticized the holding of the election and urged the public not to participate. The Commission of Elections (COMELEC) is scrambling to prepare for the elections. Mission, working with other embassies, is planning to field observer teams to the region before the election and on election day. Given COMELEC's poor track record and the ongoing political tensions in Manila, it would be positive if the ARMM elections could serve as a model, but, at this point, signs do not point in that direction. End Summary.

Campaign Begins

12. (SBU) On August 8, the five Muslim-dominated provinces that make up the ARMM will elect a governor, vice governor, and representatives to the 24-member Regional Legislative Assembly. These are the first ARMM elections since November 2001 (the GRP originally scheduled the elections for November 2004, but then postponed them). The field of candidates for the gubernatorial contest has finally solidified with Malacanang's endorsement of Zaldy Ampatuan -- the Mayor of Sharif Aguak, the capital of Maguindanao Province. Ampatuan has agreed to contest the election as the candidate of Lakas, a key party in President Arroyo's coalition. Due in part to the endorsement, as well as his family's well-known name and clan links in the region, Ampatuan is the early favorite in the election.

13. (SBU) Malacanang's decision to endorse Ampatuan was a surprise -- for months, the Palace had said it had no plans to endorse anyone. In response to the news, current ARMM Governor Parouk Hussin quit Lakas (though he remains in the race for governor as an independent candidate). Congressman Abdulgani "Gerry" Salapudin withdrew from the race after Ampatuan received Lakas' endorsement. In addition to Ampatuan and Hussin, other well-known gubernatorial candidates include (there are three other minor candidates):

-- Ibrahim "Toto" Paglas, a business entrepreneur and Mayor of Datu Paglas, who is running with the Liberal Party. Paglas is the most serious challenger to Ampatuan; and,

-- Guimid Matalam, a former congressman from Maguindanao Province running with the opposition Partido Masang Pilipino (PMP) Party.

14. (C) Many Mission contacts have expressed serious concern that the elections will be marred by fraud and violence. The Ampatuan family has a reputation as a political warlord clan that has employed violence in the past (ref B). Toto Paglas, the main rival to Zaldy Ampatuan, told poloff in late June, "We must watch the Ampatuans. They have lots of private armies and have terrorized every ARMM election." The potential for violence has fueled demands for heightened security on election day. On July 5, the Department of National Defense (DND) held a meeting with the ARMM candidates and local military commanders in Manila. Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff General Efren Abu announced that the AFP plans to enforce strictly a ban on the possession of firearms on election day and to set up check points to guard against violence. DND also reinforced the message that the AFP was completely neutral, and that all commanders in the region should avoid any and all actions that might suggest favoring one candidate over another.

15. (SBU) Two Muslim insurgent groups have criticized the holding of the election and urged the public not to participate. Press reports indicate disillusionment and disappointment in Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) ranks due to the absence of a gubernatorial candidate from the group. Some MNLF leaders are calling for their followers to boycott the polls. At a June 22-23 meeting, some delegates at the "Bangsamoro Command Conference of the MNLF" declared their intention to boycott the August 8 polls. However, former MNLF chairman and former ARMM governor Nur Misuari recently told the media (from jail where he is incarcerated by the GRP) that he considers such a boycott antithetical to the spirit of the 1996 peace agreement that the MNLF reached with the GRP. For the MILF's part, the group has said it considers the ARMM to be a "sham," and has ordered its members to boycott the election.

COMELEC in a Scramble

16. (C) COMELEC is scrambling to prepare for the elections. It recently had to abandon plans to use automated voting machines and vote counting will be done manually. On July 6, COMELEC Commissioner Florentino Tuason said he realized that there was significant pressure on his organization and the GRP, stating; "The forthcoming ARMM elections, I believe, is some sort of a litmus test not only for COMELEC, but for the entire leadership." Tuason's fellow Commissioner Mehul Sadain, a Muslim and ethnic Tausug who is in charge of COMELEC's operations in Basilan Province, told poloff June 30 that COMELEC had low morale resulting, in part, from the controversy surrounding the recently-released audiotape of a discussion between President Arroyo and a COMELEC official in 2004 (ref A). COMELEC, however, had refocused its efforts and assigned one commissioner per province in the ARMM in order to "ensure the election gets done right." Despite having received a reduced election budget of 199 million pesos (USD 3,553,000) from Congress (COMELEC requested approximately 350 million pesos), Sadain said support staff and materials in COMELEC provincial offices and voting centers would be in place by August 8. He admitted that under-funding for COMELEC operations would probably delay some results. Sadain downplayed media reports of disputes between COMELEC and GRP security forces, claiming that he understood that COMELEC would deputize roughly 1000 AFP and 500 police personnel per province to help ensure security and an orderly election.

Mission Efforts

17. (SBU) Security conditions permitting, Mission is planning to send 14 officers and 10 FSNs to the ARMM to observe the elections. Officers will make five trips in the weeks before the election to meet with GRP, COMELEC, civil society, and other groups. The Charge also plans to visit the region in early August. On election day, teams of two officers and one FSN will visit five areas to observe polling stations and ballot counting. RSO will send a representative to each city in advance of the observers to coordinate security arrangements. Mission is coordinating its efforts with the embassies of Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, among others. Mission will host a joint training session with other embassies on July 21. The training will cover poll watching procedures, security, and media interaction.

18. (U) The USG is also providing technical assistance to the election effort. USAID recently awarded an extension of an earlier grant to the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) to allow it to continue its targeted ARMM election assistance and electoral reform program through the end of 2005. IFES has supported COMELEC's efforts to improve ballot design and to update voter lists in the ARMM. IFES also is providing technical and financial assistance to the Consortium on Election Reform (CER) which has been working with 65 local NGOs in the ARMM to conduct voter education campaigns in the run-up to the election. Some of these NGOs will field their own monitoring teams on election day.

Comment

19. (C) Given COMELEC's poor track record, and the ongoing political tensions in Manila, it would be positive if the ARMM elections could serve as a model, but, at this point, signs do not point in that direction. As noted, it appears that there could well be significant violence and fraud in the elections. Malacanang's decision to endorse Zaldy Ampatuan has been very controversial, rubbing many in Mindanao the wrong way. The Ampatuan clan's involvement

could well lead to magnified problems in light of manifold accusations that it has employed violence and engaged in election cheating in the past. Working with other embassies and NGOs, Mission believes that the observation efforts should help underscore the point that the international community is watching, and supports free and fair elections. Many contacts in the ARMM have told us how much they support the U.S. plan to send observers to help keep tabs on electoral preparations and the voting process itself.

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